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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR WHA/CEN/BRIGHAM

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [PM](#) [POL](#) [SPECIALIST](#)

SUBJECT: Education, Absenteeism, and Closing Rallies.
Panama Election Countdown #11: 2 Weeks to go.

Ref: A. Panama 0863

[1](#)B. Panama 0791

Summary/Comment: Almost There

[1](#)1. (SBU) Candidates, voters, and electoral officials are in the home stretch for Panama's May 2 general elections. The Electoral Tribunal (ET) briefed the diplomatic corps on elections in an April 13 luncheon presentation with media present. On April 14, the ET warned the Supreme Court not to accept the case filed by Minister of the Presidency to inhibit Electoral Prosecutor Gerardo Solis' investigation of discretionary Presidency expenditures. The Panama chapter of Transparency International lamented that high absenteeism forced Panama's Legislative Assembly to adjourn until May 3. This week, presidential candidates announced their closing campaign events. The final presidential debate is scheduled for Tuesday, April 20. Labor leader calls for union members to submit void or blank ballots will likely fall on deaf ears. Embassy sees continued normal development of the campaign with no areas of concern. End summary.

President's legal "secret" slush fund continued

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[1](#)2. (SBU) Observers are hoping that the Supreme Court rejects the request that Minister of the Presidency Mirna Pitti filed with it on 4/13. Pitti's request seeks to ban Electoral Prosecutor Gerardo Solis from investigating the President's discretionary expenditures, on constitutional grounds. Solis told Emboffs that he has postponed all action until after May 2 so that the case does not become more politicized. Electoral Tribunal Magistrate Eduardo Valdes marked his territory with acrid 4/14 statements to the press that the Supreme Court should not meddle in electoral affairs.

3 (SBU) COMMENT: In terms of context, most Panamanians believe President Moscoso controls the Supreme Court, to which she appointed five of nine sitting Justices, all but one with close political ties to her. In this instance, Valdes' ire relates to the Court's "stealing" from the Electoral Tribunal the earlier case involving the appeal by Legislator Carlos Afu of his expulsion from the PRD. Constitutional scholars assert that the Supreme Court should only have reviewed the Afu case after the Electoral Tribunal issued a ruling. These scholars say that the Supreme Court should reject Pitti's case. As in the Afu case, former Electoral and Court officials insist that Pitti may only pursue a Supreme Court case if Solis' investigation yields an Electoral Tribunal ruling that Pitti believes violates her constitutional rights. Solis is well within his constitutional mandate, they add. END COMMENT

Electoral training for Diplomatic Corps

[1](#)4. (U) Emboffs attended a 4/13 Electoral Tribunal (ET) presentation/lunch offered to educate members of the diplomatic corps about Panama's May 2 elections. In addition to explaining the electoral law, the ET provided sample ballots, described safeguards to prevent fraud (ref. A) and invited foreign diplomats to observe the voting (ref. B). ET officials also announced international and national observers who will cover Panama's May 2 elections. In addition to 25-30 member OAS observer delegation, approximately 15 Ombudsmen from other Latin American countries will observe May 2 voting. About 1,500 Panamanian observers from the Catholic Church's Peace and Justice Commission and 300 from the Panamanian Ombudsman's office will also observe voting. Approximately 30 Embassy observers will cover 12 different sites, six in Metro Panama, where nearly half of Panama's voting population resides, and the other six outside the capital.

Where are all the Legislators?

15. (SBU) Electoral campaigning has paralyzed the Legislative Assembly as many legislators seeking re-election and staffers running for office have taken leave from their official duties, leaving the body in the hands of the very few alternates who show up. Assembly President Jacobo Salas (Arnulfista), and Budget Committee Chairman Arnulfista Alcibiades Vasquez (Arnulfista), pleaded with their colleagues to attend legislative sessions to no avail. So little was accomplished earlier this week that Assembly management postponed sessions until May 3. To compensate for lost time, legislators are supposed to work all Fridays and Saturdays until the Assembly adjourns on June 30. Civil society representatives, most notably Transparency International (TI) Panama Chapter's Executive Director Angelica Maytin have asked Panamanians to take absenteeism into account when voting on May 2.

TI-Panama to publish candidates' backgrounds

16. (SBU) Panama's Chapter of Transparency International (TI) plans to broadcast biographical information about presidential candidates and other candidates, as well as information about their proposed policies. TI sent candidates a questionnaire with an April 15 deadline, then published a 4/14 ad in local media reminding candidates that hadn't submitted information to do so and listing their names. The list included, among others, presidential candidates Martin Torrijos (PRD-PP) and Ricardo Martinelli (CD). A PRD source called the long and detailed questionnaire "ridiculous." Source told Embassy that Torrijos was adamantly against responding because, "it felt as if he were confessing to the Pope."

Final Campaign Rallies

17. (U) Presidential candidates have announced traditionally massive campaign closing rallies. The two largest coalitions have made the most complex plans. Arnulfista candidate Jose Miguel Aleman announced at a press conference that his alliance has planned a large caravan in Panama City on Sunday, April 18 and will top off their campaign on Sunday, April 25 at a large Panama City gathering. Unfazed by financial constraints, PRD-PP Martin Torrijos will hold several regional events to top off his campaign. Also on 4/25, Torrijos will close his campaign in the western province of Chiriqui. Torrijos will then close in Panama City on 4/28. He is considering other final events in other parts of the country.

18. (U) Panama's two one-party candidates have also discussed their plans for final campaign events. Solidarity presidential candidate Guillermo Endara, who has run a frugal campaign due to lack of funds, decided not to hold a large event in a single venue, but will stage a six-day caravan beginning in the Western Province of Chiriqui and ending in the Atlantic Province of Colon, apparently an Endara stronghold. During the caravan, Endara plans to visit 29 communities. Cambio Democratico Ricardo Martinelli hasn't announced specific plans yet, but his associates have suggested that he will do something unconventional. Critics have speculated that Martinelli might refrain from hosting a large event to avoid the embarrassment of a weak turnout.

Unions call for void/blank votes

19. (SBU) In another demonstration of their lack of civic responsibility, Panama's union leaders have called on their members to either void their vote or submit a blank ballot on May 2. They're protesting the arrest of SUNTRACS leader Gerardo Lopez after a recent fracas at the Ministry of Labor where SUNTRACS was seeking to establish a legal personality for a new union of workers on the Southern Corridor highway. Unions in Panama are poorly organized, but have the strongest pull in the construction and transportation sectors, where they seek to protect vested interests. (COMMENT: The Cuban-funded SUNTRACS blocked streets to protest the ouster of former CSS director Juan Jovane in September 2003. Since Panama's vote is secret and unions are poorly organized, Embassy does not expect any major adherence to this call.)

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